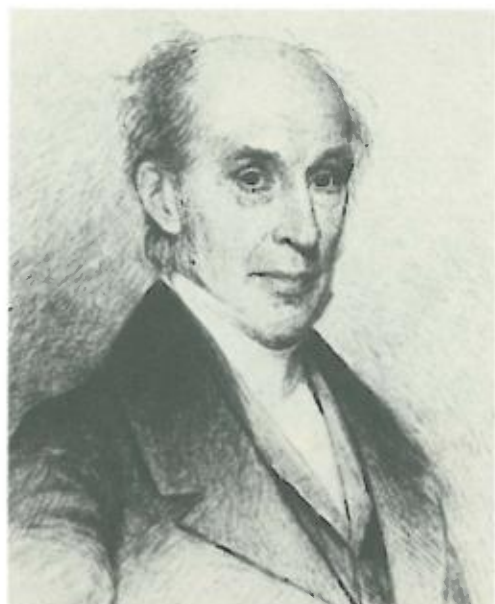


A Biographical Dictionary of Architects in Maine



Charles Bulfinch
1763-1844

At the time Charles Bulfinch was born in Boston in 1763, Maine was a province of the royal colony of Massachusetts; when statehood was granted in 1820, he had already established important and life-long Down East connections. The direct link was Bulfinch's brother-in-law, Charles Vaughan, a developer of the Kennebec Valley and founder of the town of Hallowell. In the early 1790s, Bulfinch and Vaughan were associated in numerous Massachusetts philanthropies as well as the brilliant but financially disastrous Tontine Crescent project of 1793-94. This first major urban housing scheme undertaken in the United States became widely known following its publication in the *Massachusetts Magazine* in February, 1794. Four years later, Vaughan left Boston for Hallowell and for the next forty years was one of Maine's leading citizens, especially active in the development of agriculture and stock raising. The Bulfinches frequently spent their summers in Hallowell, and the architect's early Maine commissions were due in part to the Vaughan connection.

The first of these was Bulfinch's 1801 "Plan of Condeskeag Point" at the confluence of the Penobscot River and the Kenduskeag Stream in Bangor. Bangor was settled in 1769 and incorporated as a town in 1791. The first survey, made in 1773 under the direction of the Proprietors of the Waldo Patent, was probably used as the basis for Bulfinch's scheme of dividing the Point by a grid of nine streets varying in width from 40 to 60 feet and delineating 213 street and 40 water lots.¹ The former averaged 5,000 square feet; the water sites ranged from minimal parcels of approximately 2,000 square feet to mere beach heads. The plan, centering on a major thoroughfare running east-west and terminating in a bridge over the Kenduskeag, was apparently instrumental in shaping the development of what is today downtown Bangor.

The Bulfinch attribution to the cupola of the Congregational Church in Hallowell of 1806 rests upon the strongest stylistic and circumstantial evidence (Figure 1). The church edifice, completed in 1796 in the heavy, old-fashioned Georgian lines popularized twenty years earlier by Thomas Dawes' Brattle Square Church in Boston, was topped originally by a square belfry in which hung a bell purchased from Paul Revere in 1802. By that year Charles Vaughan had settled permanently in Hallowell, and undoubtedly it was he who arranged for the erection of the neo-classical cupola that relates closely to terminal structures designed by his brother-in-law for the Congregational Church, Taunton, Massachusetts (1790) and Boston's Boylston Hall and Market (1809), as well as two unidentified elevations among the architect's drawings on deposit in the Library of Congress. The cupola was enthusiastically described prior to its destruction by fire in 1878 as "not a copy but a new creation"² The attribution to Bulfinch, however, rests as much upon a likeness to other known designs of the architect as to the strong family connection with the town of Hallowell.

When in 1828 former Governor William King was appointed Commissioner of Public Buildings with specific instructions to initiate the construction of a state house, he turned to Charles Bulfinch, who then

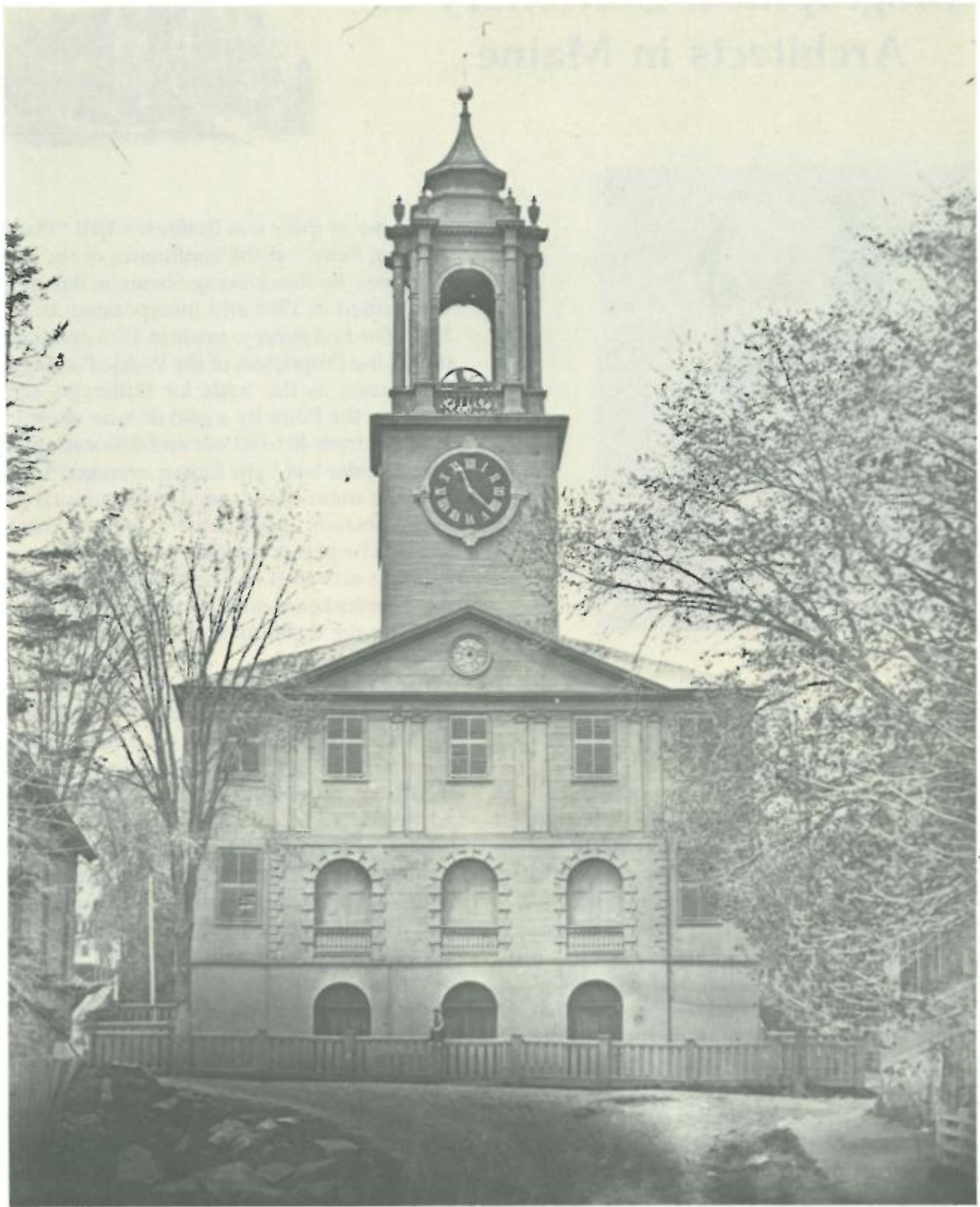


Figure 1. Old South Church, Hallowell, c. 1875 view (Courtesy of Gary Elwell, Hallowell).

was completing his work as Architect of the Capitol in Washington, D.C. The following summer Bulfinch submitted several alternative plans, and the one "representing the Boston State House reduced" was selected by the legislators (Figure 2).³

As Bulfinch's Massachusetts State House was still, after thirty years, the most celebrated building in New England, this choice was natural enough even if at variance with the architect's preference for the emerging national Greek Revival style. However, three decades in public service had conditioned Bulfinch to political decisions. As he wrote to Commissioner King in 1829:

I have endeavored, while preserving the general outline of the Boston State House, to prevent its being a servile Copy; and have aimed at giving it an air of simplicity, which, while I hope it will appear reconcilable to good taste, will render it easy to execute in your material.

The site selected for the State House—a low hill—was also similar to the Boston model. Equally familiar was the inflationary factor. At the time the cornerstone was laid on July 4, 1829, the cost of construction was estimated at \$80,000. When the building was occupied in January, 1832, the final cost was \$145,000.

The Maine State House is the only one of Bulfinch's public buildings for which a complete set of drawings exists, in this case approximately one hundred in all, mostly tinted and inked in fine lines on white watercolor paper. They show the original designs for the rear elevation, which as in the case of the Massachusetts State House, was a one dimensional representation of the front with the colonnade suggested by pilasters. Alternative studies were made as requested by the legislature, including three separate schemes for the dome as well as many construction details for stonework, interior finish, etc. The subject of a doctoral dissertation, the Maine State House was the first Bulfinch building to receive definitive scholarly treatment.⁴

The legislature's request for two sets of plans reflected the uncertainty regarding cost and construction problems attendant upon building in what was then almost a wilderness. Accordingly, the first design prescribed the pitched roof without dome recommended by the commissioners. Concerning this question Bulfinch wrote William King from

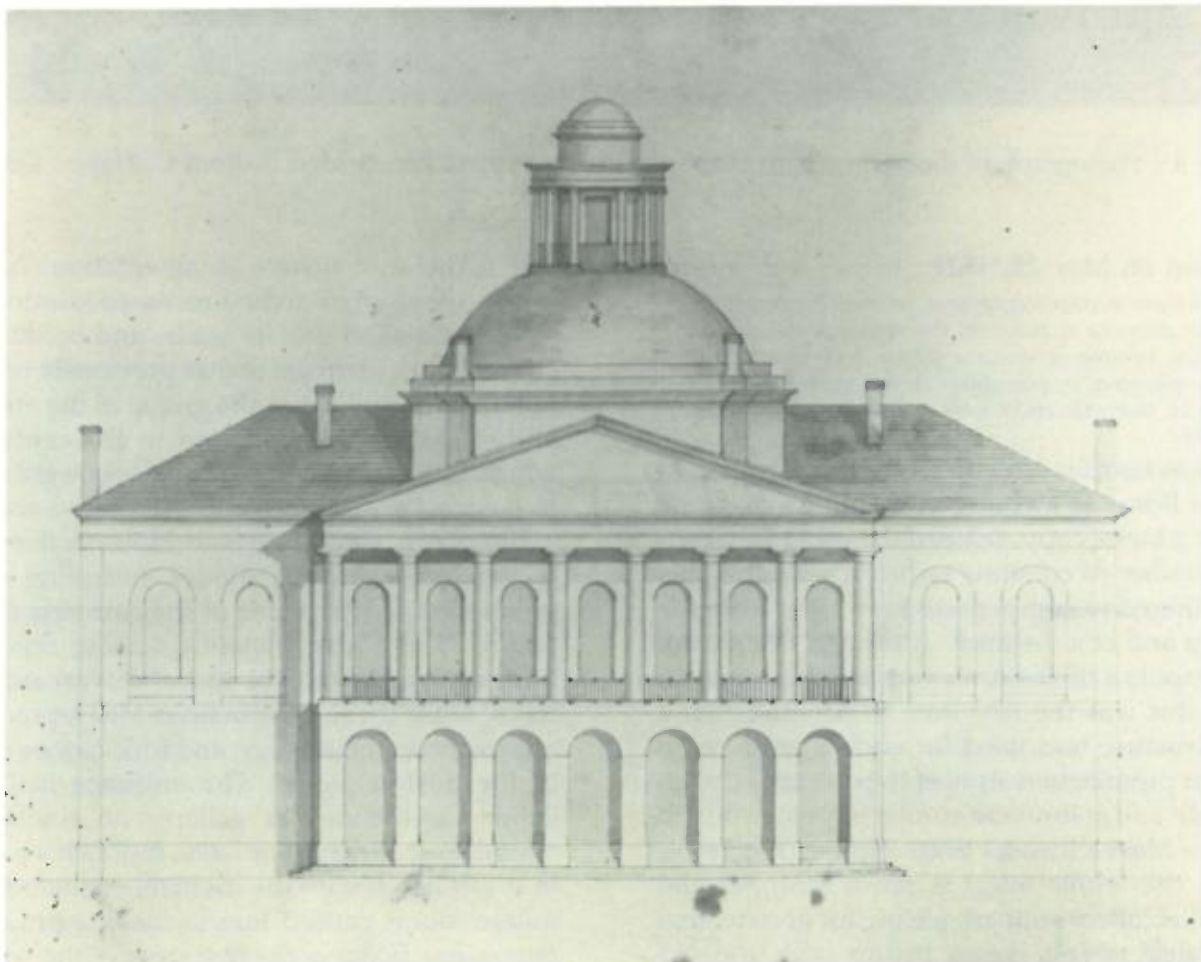


Figure 2. Principal Elevation of the Maine State House, Augusta, by Charles Bulfinch, 1829 (Courtesy of Maine State Library, Augusta).

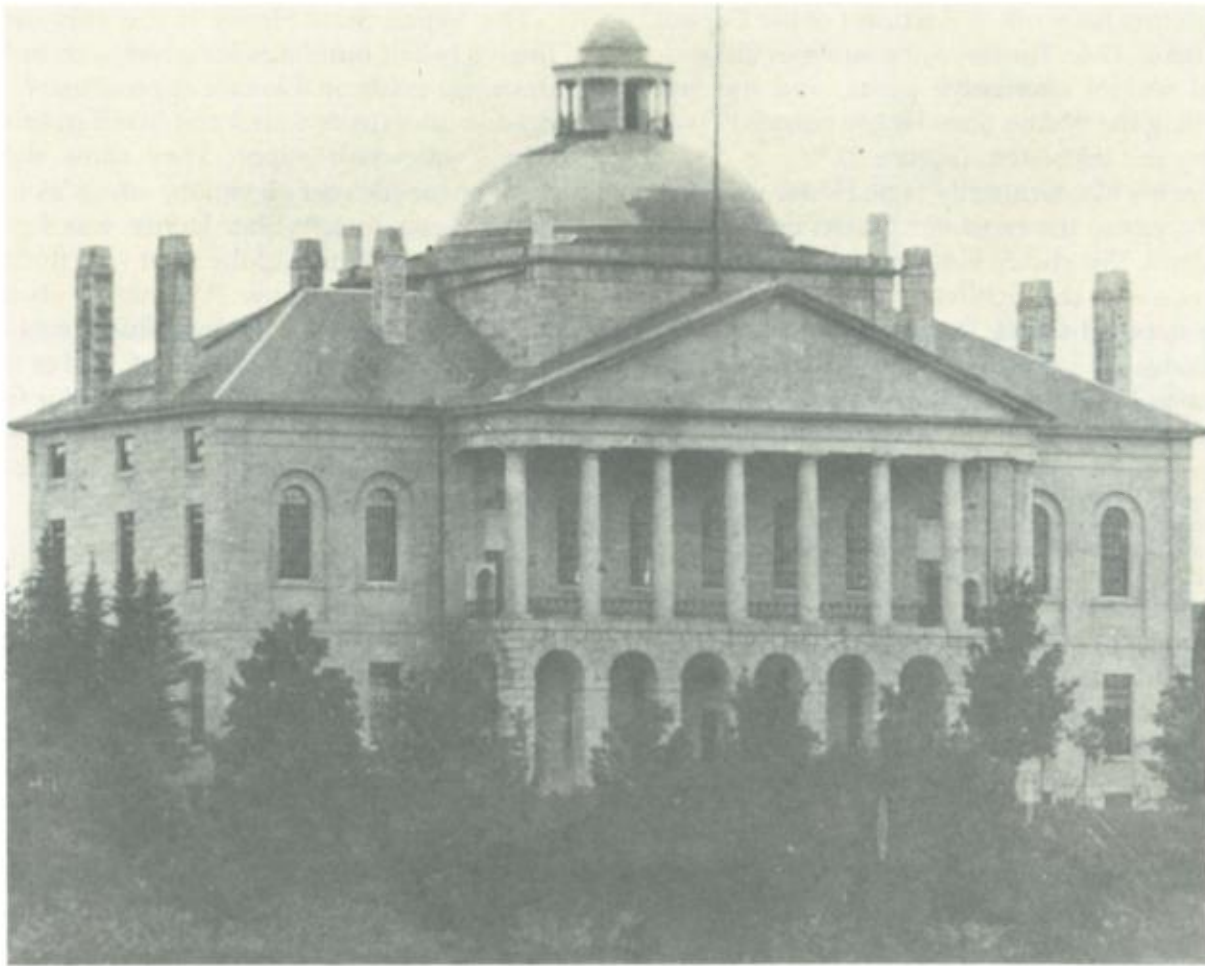


Figure 3. Photograph of the Maine State House, 1866 (Courtesy of Mr. & Mrs. Bedford C. Hayes, Gorham).

Washington on May 29, 1829:

I have followed your suggestion, in omitting any large dome, but propose to place on the center of the attic, a copy of the Temple of Vesta at Rome: a form which is generally pleasing in execution. It will give a covered cupola of 12' diameter and a walk within the surrounding colonnade.⁵

Bulfinch was familiar with the Temple of Vesta from his visit to Rome as a young man, but he made no attempt at a literal copy. Instead the order is changed, the number of columns reduced, and the proportions altered to compensate for a view from the ground up and at a distance. Although the idea of giving a cupola a tholos form was not original with Bulfinch, this was the first time in America that a specific structure was used for such a purpose.⁶

The most prominent feature of the executed design is an arcade and colonnade similar in proportion to that of the Massachusetts State House (Figure 3). However, the whole effect is much stronger and reflects the architect's superb feeling for granite, first demonstrated twenty years before with the old Boston City Hall. The Maine State House is a transitional building, in which the somewhat fussy neoclassical detailing of the Massachusetts model gave

way to the most austere ornamentation: Tuscan columns, unadorned arched recessed windows set in smooth-finished granite walls, and boldly patterned iron work identical to that previously used in the national Capitol. Even the guttae in the entablature of the colonnade are omitted in the central block, whose large, closely joined surfaces were designed to contrast with the deeply rusticated arcade.

The plan of the Maine State House followed closely the Massachusetts model, including even the orientation to the points of the compass (Figures 4 and 5). The Maine Senate Chamber repeated the Ionic screen at both the east and west sides of the room, while the Representatives Hall reproduced the approximate dimensions and four corner fireplaces of the Boston model. The entrance hall is again Doric, and the visitors' galleries are similarly fitted over the secondary stair halls. Bulfinch's experience in Washington with the insatiable demand for committee rooms caused him to insert extra offices in mezzanine floors in the first story of the wings, and the plan of the Governor's office and Council chamber is more convenient and sophisticated than in the earlier state house. The ornamentation, for

which Bulfinch prepared cut-out diagrams, was much simpler and reflected the architect's growing interest in Greek Revival forms that followed his long residence in Washington.

After alterations commencing in 1852 and the complete rebuilding of 1909-10, little remains of the Bulfinch state house except for the facade now embedded in a structure more than twice its original length.⁷ Gone, too, is Bulfinch's landscaping, a series of descending concentric ovals planted with "forest trees". At the time of construction, however, the Maine State House powerfully influenced civic building in the United States. The formula Bulfinch

worked out over three decades culminating in the original Augusta structure—hemispherical dome and columnar frontpiece, and the use of granite as the most suitable building material—was virtually unchallenged as the mode for public architecture all through the nineteenth century and directly influenced state capitol construction as far south as Mississippi and west to California.

Harold Kirker
University of California, Santa Barbara
May, 1985

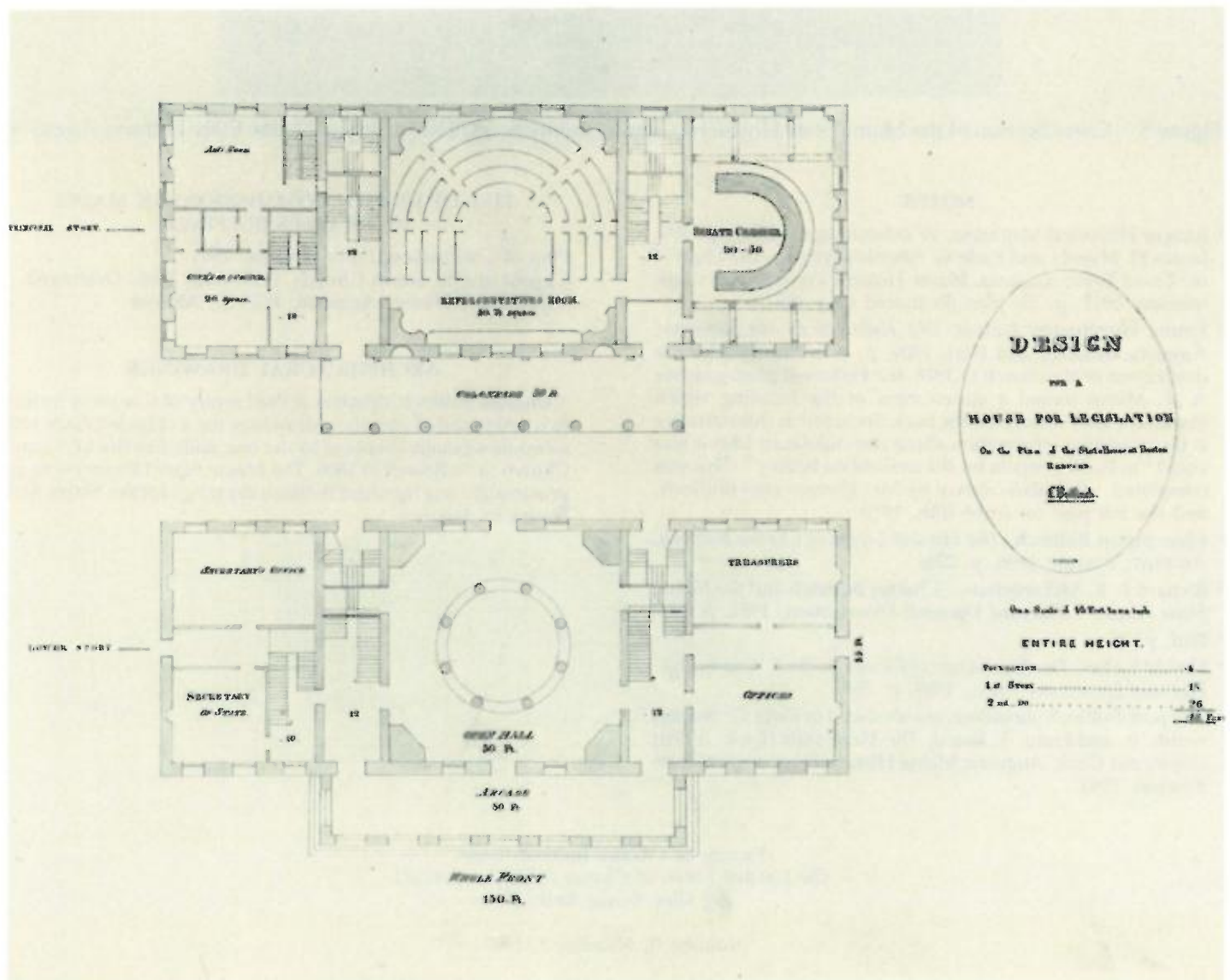


Figure 4. Floor Plans for the Maine State House by Charles Bulfinch, 1829 (Courtesy of Maine State Library, Augusta).

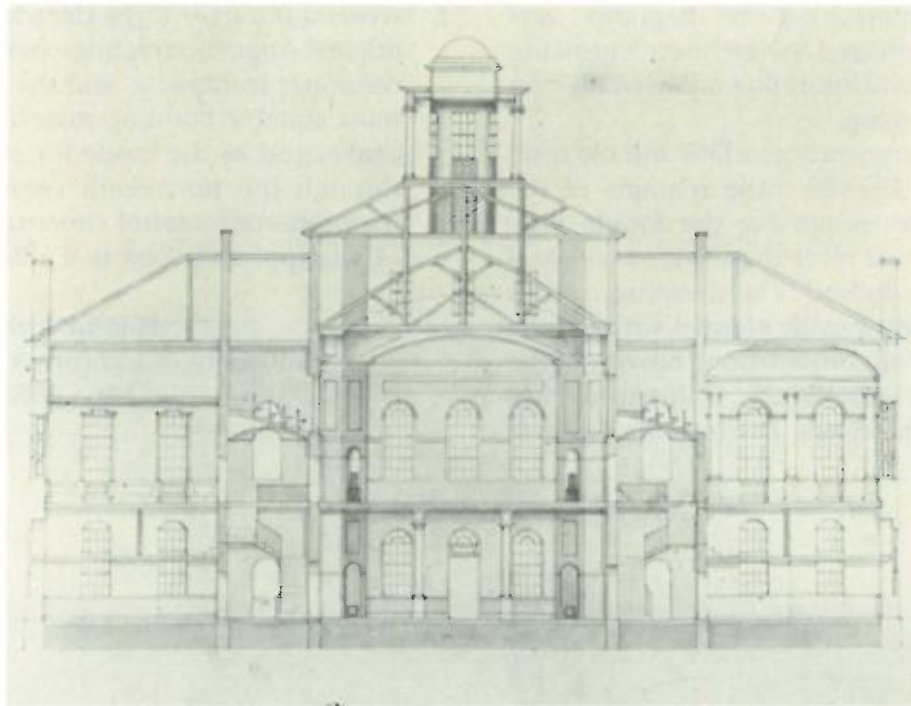


Figure 5. Cross Section of the Maine State House by Charles Bulfinch, 1829 (Courtesy of Maine State Library, Augusta).

NOTES

- ¹ Bangor Historical Magazine, IV (March-April, 1889), p. 195; James H. Mundy and Earle G. Shettleworth, Jr., *The Flight of the Grand Eagle*, Augusta: Maine Historic Preservation Commission, 1977, p. 55, plan illustrated on p. 56.
- ² Emma Huntington Nason, *Old Hallowell on the Kennebec*, Augusta: Burleigh and Flint, 1909, p. 195. Shortly after the destruction of the church in 1878, the Hallowell photographer A. F. Morse issued a stereo view of the building which featured a brief history on the back. Included in this narrative is the following information about the cupola: In 1806 it was voted "to build a cupola for the unfinished belfrey". This was completed, after plans drawn by Mr. Thomas (sic) Bulfinch, and the bill paid on April 10th, 1810.
- ³ Ellen Susan Bulfinch, *The Life and Letters of Charles Bulfinch, Architect*, Boston: 1896, p. 275.
- ⁴ Richard B. K. McLanathan, "Charles Bulfinch and the Maine State House", Harvard Doctoral Dissertation, 1951, p. 131.
- ⁵ *Ibid*, p. 98.
- ⁶ Harold Kirker, *The Architecture of Charles Bulfinch*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969, p. 355.
- ⁷ The post-Bulfinch alterations are reviewed in Earle G. Shettleworth, Jr. and Frank A. Beard, *The Maine State House: A Brief History and Guide*, Augusta: Maine Historic Preservation Commission, 1981.

LIST OF KNOWN COMMISSIONS IN MAINE BY CHARLES BULFINCH

Plan of Condeskeag Point, Bangor, 1801
Cupola of Old South Church, Hallowell, 1806, Destroyed
Maine State House, Augusta, 1829-32, Altered

ARCHITECTURAL DRAWINGS

Charles Bulfinch's papers at the Library of Congress include two unidentified elevation drawings for a church facade with a cupola virtually identical to the one added to the Old South Church in Hallowell in 1806. The Maine State Library owns approximately one hundred Bulfinch drawings for the Maine State House in Augusta.

Picture of Charles Bulfinch from
The Life and Letters of Charles Bulfinch, Architect
by Ellen Susan Bulfinch

Volume II, Number 7, 1985

Published by the Maine Historic Preservation Commission
55 Capitol Street, Augusta, Maine 04333
Earle G. Shettleworth, Jr., Editor
Roger G. Reed, Associate Editor

*This publication has been financed in part with federal funds from
the National Park Service, Department of the Interior.*